

The image features a background with a warm, orange-to-purple gradient and a subtle, textured pattern. The text "Advent Hope" is written in a large, dark blue, cursive font. Below it, "LISTENING TO ISAIAH" is written in a smaller, white, all-caps, sans-serif font.

Advent Hope

LISTENING TO ISAIAH

Williamsburg Christian Church

For more resources or to listen to the Advent meditations online, go to www.williamsburgchristianchurch.org/advent

INTRODUCTION

Judging by the news media, social media and casual conversations at kitchen tables, it appears that many in our nation are listening to one of two voices. One voice is shouting declarations of hope telling us that our economy will finally turn around as jobs will spring up from the grounds of revitalized capitalism. Morality will finally be legislated to society from the highest court in the land. Safety and security will come to us in the form of walls and greater weaponry as we wipe out all who threaten our way of life. These voices tell us that America will become great and powerful again. The other voice is shouting declarations of fear telling us that many of our civil rights and civil liberties will be sacrificed on the altar of conservatism and fundamentalist religion. Harm is coming to all of us, especially the marginalized and vulnerable. These voices tell us that our country will lose its greatness as democracy unravels before our very eyes.

There is a lot we do not know if we are to validate the claims of either voice. What we do know is that both want our attention and affections. They want us to see what they see based upon the data they've compiled, the facts they've weighed, and the feelings they've sorted out through intellectual reason and logic. The preoccupation of both voices is the desire to control outcomes and property manage life. And if by some chance what they see turns out to be wrong, these two voices will quickly trade bullhorns. The voices shouting declarations of hope will shout declarations of fear, while the voices once shouting declarations of fear will shout declarations of hope. It just goes to show that both of these voices are more prone to fear and anxiety rather than hope.

Almost unnoticed, in the midst of the noise, along comes Advent. Advent calls our attention to a different nation and people, the Jews. The Jews are a people who, for the most part, have not been committed to compiling data, weighing facts and sorting out feelings through intellectual reason and logic. They are committed to their peculiar stories, stories that speak of transformation, liberation, healing, and newness, all coming about in the form of miracles wielded by a God who can do the impossible. At the center of these stories are prophets whose voice offers words that are expressive and imaginative, disruptive and comforting. These prophets are nothing less than poets. To remember their imaginative and expressive language we will call them poet-prophets.

Poet-prophets knew that on-going commitments to what we think we see by compiling data, weighing facts and sorting out feelings through reason and logic will not transform people's hearts or make things new. Poet-prophets will challenge the claims of what we think we see. Poet-prophets will open the world beyond reason. Poet-prophets will give access to tensions and contradictions that disrupt our logic. Poet-prophets will not only *remember* but will *wonder* and *imagine* and even *propose a new way forward*.

So when Jews were faithful they did not compile data, weigh facts, and sort out feelings through reason and logic, they listened to their poets. Scholars say that almost 75% of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible is poetry. Jacob did poetry when he blessed his twelve sons. Moses and Miriam did poetry when God's people are liberated from slavery. Deborah and Barak did poetry when the Canaanites were defeated. Hannah did

poetry when Samuel was born. The Jews did poetry when David defeated Goliath. And Mary did poetry when she found she was pregnant with the Christ-child. All of these fathers and mothers of Israel did poetry when they witnessed God do the impossible right before their eyes, even though they could not explain it.

Advent is the divine proposal from God to struggle between the words of the truly poetic and prophetic that speaks of the transforming presence of God, and the false prophets of our day with all their reason and logic that seeks to keep control. If that is so, Advent becomes a time for relinquishing some control in order to receive the transforming presence of God who is able to do the impossible.

ISAIAH

The book of Isaiah is framed by poems. In the beginning of the book of Isaiah in chapter 2 (vs. 1-4) the poet-prophet says:

*"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's house will be established
at the top of the mountains
and will be raised above the hills.
All nations will stream to it,
and many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us about His ways
so that we may walk in His paths."
For instruction will go out of Zion
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He will settle disputes among the nations
and provide arbitration for many peoples.
They will turn their swords into plows
and their spears into pruning knives.
Nations will not take up the sword against other nations,
and they will never again train for war."*

Then at the end of the book of Isaiah in chapter 65 the poet-prophet says (vs. 17-18, 20-21,25):

*"For I will create a new heaven and a new earth;
the past events will not be remembered or come to mind.
Then be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I will create Jerusalem to be a joy
and its people to be a delight."
And in that new city infants will not die...and People will build houses and live in
them..."*

Then a kingdom of peace finally comes:

*“The wolf and the lamb and the lion will feed together,
They will not do what is evil or destroy on My entire holy mountain,’
says the Lord.”*

It is all imagined. It is all proposed because it is all promised by the Creator of all things, our God who specializes in doing the impossible.

The poet-prophet’s claims *disrupts the data that has been compiled, the facts that have been weighed and the feelings that have been sorted out through intellectual reason and logic.*

In between chapter 2 and 65 we have chapters 8 & 9.

OUR FOCUS TEXT

Chapter 9 begins with the poet-prophet speaking of a world that sounds much like our own, one covered in the darkness of violence, fear and anxiety. The people of Judah have compiled the data and weighed the facts and all they see is only “distress and darkness, the gloom of affliction” (Isaiah 8:22). Uncertain of where to turn they look for help, but in all the wrong places, including false gods, the dead, and their political leaders (Isaiah 8:19-20). Overwhelmed by the darkness that covers them, people look to anyone or anything for light and hope.

“Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times when He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future He will bring honor to the Way of the Sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations.

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
a light has dawned
on those living in the land of darkness.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased its joy.
The people have rejoiced before You
as they rejoice at harvest time
and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.
For You have shattered their oppressive yoke
and the rod on their shoulders,
the staff of their oppressor,
just as You did on the day of Midian.
For the trampling boot of battle
and the bloodied garments of war
will be burned as fuel for the fire.”*

Isaiah imaginatively proposes a time when this “great Light” would dawn on the “way of the sea,” which ran through Galilee. **With this great light**, the nation would grow and celebrate as if a great harvest has come. **With this great light**, the rod of oppression would be lifted and all military gear would be burned as fuel for fires. With **this great light**, the land would be filled with hope and peace and joy while oppression and war would no longer exist.

This great light would come with the birth of a child who would be the Light of the World.

“For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us and the government will rest on his shoulders.”

A great light dawns with a birth announcement. The fortunes of Israel and Judah, as well as the whole earth, will turn on the birth of this child. This birth announces hope and breaks the claims of the data and reasoning that speak of unending war, paralyzing fear and gut-wrenching anxiety. However, the claims of this birth announcement will not rest on man-made governments, but upon the Government he will make available to humanity.

- The poet tells us that the child to be born will be called *Wonderful Counselor*, because He will have wisdom, not just data and reasoning.
- He will be called *Mighty God*, because He will demonstrate God’s strength and power to do the impossible, not just what the data and reasoning say is possible.
- He will be called *Everlasting Father*, because He will act with compassion and mercy and without partiality, on behalf of all marginalized peoples, instead of the pick-and-choose mentality of a pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps logic of benevolence.
- He will be called *Prince of Peace*, because He will love even His enemies and offer a life-giving peace and restorative justice through His kingdom of grace, instead of the death-dealing vengeance of punitive justice.

Then the poet extends his arms and takes a deep breath as he is about to tell us something big:

*“His government and its peace
will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies
will make this happen!”*

The relentless love of the God of heaven and earth will personally make this happen, the poet says. As absurd as it sounds, it is a promise of God, and God always keeps His promises.

4. How does His wisdom often contradict the wisdom of society?

5. How does King Jesus as Wonderful Counselor give you hope?

6. How can King Jesus become the “Wonderful Counselor” for you and/or your family (be specific)

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE OF HOPE

As you light the candle of hope consider asking the following questions, one each night. How is Jesus the hope of the world? How is Jesus the hope of our nation? How is the Jesus the hope of our neighborhood? How is Jesus the hope of our friends? How is Jesus the hope of our own lives?

CONCLUDING MEDITATION

In our text the poet-prophet tells us of a new possibility of peace, of wholeness and well-being, where fear and anxiety no longer has to rule our hearts because hope has been revealed by the great light that is the Christ-child who will become our King, King Jesus.

Like every ruler this coming Ruler will have to sort things out in accordance to his government where, as the poet-prophets tell us over and over again, He will make decisions that side with the poor, not the rich; the hungry, not the well-fed; those who mourn in humility, not those who laugh in pride; those who are meek and stand on the margins of society and those who are persecuted, not those who stand in the center of society with self-centered power (read *Luke 4:16-19, 6:20-26, 14:7-23; Matthew 25:31-46*).

“Where is your data now,” the poet seems to ask? “Your data and reasoning may tell you that the power comes through domination; it may tell you that vengeance should be yours to take; it may tell you that your rights matter above another; it may tell you that threats of terror should cause you to fear.

“But,” the poet-prophet asks, “What do you say about the Christ-child who will live, die, be resurrected, and will reign forever more as He makes His presence known in and among His people? What do you say about His power that came not through domination, but through self-giving love? What do you say about His proclamation that vengeance is His to take? What do you say about His willingness to give up His rights as God of heaven to be born in a manger, so we can have the right to be called children of God? What do you say about His assurance that you need not fear the terrorists that can destroy only our bodies and not our souls? What do you say about His promise that for those who have trusted Him as King and Lord have been made a citizen of a kingdom that will never be in trouble and they will never truly die?”

“Does all of this sound impossible,” the poet-prophet asks? “Do you believe that the God has given us a great light shining on the possibility of transformation, liberation, healing, and newness, all coming about in the form of miracle we remember during Advent, the arrival of God in the flesh, the Christ-child called Emmanuel, God with Us? Can you live like you believe it is a promise God is able to keep?”

When we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, we live like we believe it’s a promise God is able to keep. When we treat others as we be treated we live like we believe it’s a promise God is able to keep. When we give generously to those who can never pay us back we live like we believe it’s a promise God is able to keep.

When we forget and fall back into the habit of compiling data, weighing facts and sorting out our feelings through reason and logic, we need to remember to trust that God is at work in the world. We need to remember that through the coming of the long expected King Jesus God's people have been invited to join him in his work as watchful, waiting and discerning witnesses to the world that is and is to come. We will listen to the poet-prophets, like Isaiah, as we long for the presence of the King with a watchful hope, abiding peace, self-giving love and unending joy.

As we wait on the Lord in hope, we need the Holy Spirit to produce from within us patience (Galatians 5:22-23). Pastor and author Henri Nouwen once said,

“A waiting person is a patient person. The word ‘patience’ means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her womb.”

1. How can you the thoughtfulness of Advent (lighting candles at home, during our worship gathering, etc) help you wait upon the Lord with hope (remember the explanation of hope given on page 6)?

“Advent is about learning to wait. It is about not having to know exactly what is coming tomorrow, only that whatever it is, it is of the essence of sanctification for us. Every piece of it, some hard, some uplifting, is sign of the work of God alive in us. We are becoming as we go. We learn in Advent to stay in the present, knowing that only the present well-lived can possibly lead us to the fullness of life.

“Advent relieves us of our commitment to the frenetic in a fast-paced world. It slows us down. It makes us think. It makes us look beyond today to the “great tomorrow” of life. Without Advent, moved only by the race to nowhere that exhausts the world around us, we could be so frantic with trying to consume and control this life that we fail to develop within ourselves a taste for the spirit that does not die and will not slip through our fingers like melted snow.”

~ Joan Chittister

PRAYER

Eternal God of new possibilities, may your coming to us in the form of the Christ child alert us to watchful waiting that results in hopeful living. Wake us from our drowsy comings and goings in the ordinary activities of life. Sober us from the dizziness of frantic activity and scrambling to make life work out in accordance to our plans. Steer us away from the roads that lead to impulsive decisions arising from our impatience. Yes Lord, awaken us to your presence and anchor us in the hope of your coming, and open our hearts to you. Amen.